

VESSEL VISAGE

Exhibit shows the face of Duxbury's shipbuilding past

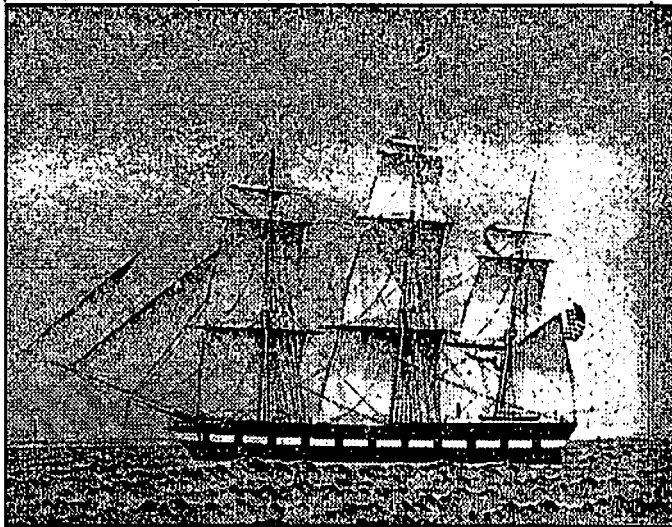
It's hard to believe that formal, 19th-century portraits of sailing ships — creamy sails billowing, the rigging neat and taut, pictured against stylized backgrounds of exotic ports — could tell us much about the texture of life in a South Shore village 150 or 200 years ago.

But that's just what you'll see, feel and understand if you visit the King Caesar historic house in Duxbury this summer, where the Duxbury Rural and Historical Society has mounted a fascinating and rewarding little exhibition, "Duxbury on the High Seas."

The show memorializes Duxbury's era as a shipbuilding town — a period that coincided with the rise of the newborn United States of America as a world economic force in the first half of the 19th century.

The exhibition shows us the cosmopolitan connections and adventurous spirit of people we are likely to think of — if at all — as dry, narrow-minded Yankee businessmen.

The center of the show is two dozen or so portraits of vessels built in Duxbury, owned by Duxbury



LISA BUL/The Patriot Ledger

merchants or captained by Duxbury masters. The pictures themselves, most of them highly stylized watercolor-and-ink productions by commercial artists of the time who were more draftsmen than painters, have the perfection and limited charm of Indian miniatures.

Those who have a fondness for the elegant lines of wooden sailing ships and a nostalgia for a handmade, pre-industrial past will love them for their own sake.

And the best of them are quite striking, such as the show's signature piece, "The Brig Lion of Duxbury Entering Smyrna Harbor," painted by Rafaele Cossini in 1840 in Smyrna, Turkey. This pristine, dashing watercolor in an ornate gilt frame, loaned by Mr. and Mrs. Robert C. Vose III of Duxbury, has all the pride and youthful promise of a wedding portrait.

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This painting of the New Jersey is one of many 19th-century portraits of ships on display at the King Caesar historic house in Duxbury through September.

Duxbury memorialized as a sailing community

SHIPS

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The legends at the bottom of many of the ship portraits begin to suggest the richer texture of the exhibition. Besides Smyrna (present-day Izmir, where the Lion picked up wool), we see Duxbury-based ships at Marseille, Palermo, Trieste, the coast of Africa and even Elsinore in Denmark.

Wall labels tell us the ships carried the stuff of 19th century life: coffee from Rio, cotton from Charleston to England, molasses, sugar and lumber from the Caribbean, merchandise and possibly '49ers to San Francisco.

The South Shore's connection to events we learned about in American history classes snaps into focus.

A color photo-reproduction of an oil painting owned by the Peabody Essex Museum of Salem shows the Duxbury brig Herald entering Dixcove, a small trading station on the Gold Coast of Africa. There is no mention of the slave trade in the society's wall text, but it's hard to think of another reason for the ship to be there. Suddenly, the infamous "triangle trade" seems much closer to home.

Besides pictures of ships, there are portraits and personal effects of Duxbury men who built, owned and captained them, men such as Seth Sprague, Martin Waterman and David

ART REVIEW

DUXBURY ON THE HIGH SEAS

Marine portraits and artifacts, through September at the King Caesar House, King Caesar Road, Duxbury. Admission free; hours: 1 to 4 p.m. Wednesday through Saturday. 781-934-6106.

Cushman, whose cramped cabin in the ship Roscius is reproduced as part of the exhibition.

Letters to parents and wives suggest how the sights and life of foreign land were relayed home by these South Shore seafarers. A series of closely written letters from Jonathan Smith, who first went to sea as a ship's boy in 1842 and later sailed as an officer and a captain, give more than a taste of the sailor's life and of the novelty and excitement of foreign countries that today are tourist destinations.

One of the most charming exhibits is a framed set of six small paintings of exotically dressed and employed men in India. The early 19th-century equivalent of postcards, they were brought back by Captain Freeman Soule.

Besides generations of Soules, there

are other names here that live on today in Duxbury streets and landmarks:

Winsors and Drews and Wadsworths. And, of course, the two Ezra Westons, father and son, who dominated the town's business and civic life from the 1790s until the 1840s and were among the leading ship owners in the country, are featured in the show. Each Weston was known in turn as "King Caesar" (at best a grudging compliment), and there is considerable information in the exhibition on their extensive enterprises.

The center of the show is two dozen or so portraits of vessels built in Duxbury, owned by Duxbury merchants or captained by Duxbury masters.

I have long wondered how Duxbury, with its shallow bay (like the North River in Scituate, Norwell, Marshfield and Pembroke), could have been a shipbuilding center to rival the much deeper harbors of Boston and Salem. A look at the types and size of the vessels in these portraits answers that question. Almost all are brigs and barks — smaller, mostly two-

masted vessels — instead of full-sized, three-masted ships. These smaller vessels could be launched and docked in the shallow South Shore harbors.

A few full-sized ships are pictured, including the famous clipper Flying Cloud, but they were for the most part

built elsewhere and captained for at least part of their lives by Duxbury masters.

The shallow harbors and estuaries eventually doomed South Shore shipbuilding. By the mid-1840s the heyday was past, and even the proud Weston fleet was being sold off for use as whalers in the South Pacific and as coastal cargo tramps.

A small companion exhibition in an upstairs room shows other vanished aspects of Duxbury life, in historic photographs of lost structures, views, industries and lifestyles. And on a landing in the connecting stairway, a model of the Bluefish River shows two of the former Duxbury shipyards.

Best of all, though, is to walk out onto the front lawn of the King Caesar House, look across the expanse of Duxbury Bay to Manomet headland and take in the prospect that lured those shipbuilders, merchants and sailors to distant shores.

— JON LEHMAN
For The Patriot Ledger